

# HISTORY & FOLKLORE

## The Seven Courthouses of Liberty County

(Continued from previous page)

lished the Northeast cornerstone of this brick courthouse as a permanent point for the surveying of all lots in the Corporation of Liberty on the East side of the Trinity River.

An interesting notice was placed in The Liberty Gazette by the County Clerk beginning August 31, 1860:

### A Warning

*In these times of Incendiarism and town burnings, I call the attention of parties interested, to the fact that there are at present in the office of the County Clerk, more than Three Hundred Deeds and other evidences of title to lands, which have been recorded and allowed to remain in the office. The Court House, though brick, is not fire-proof, and if the office should be destroyed, parties may find much difficulty in again establishing their title; and to avoid this they would do well to get their titles out now, and if the records should be destroyed, they can have them again recorded. Persons calling for their deeds will please bring the money to pay the recording fees, otherwise they cannot expect to get them.*

P.K. Smith, Clerk

On the morning of December 27, 1872, this brick courthouse caught on fire destroying the entire building. Also destroyed were the records of the Surveyor's and Sheriff's office and about two-thirds of the records in the District Clerk's office.

Almost four years passed before the Commissioners Court gave any consideration to the construction of a new courthouse. It was not until November 13, 1876, that the commissioners appointed a committee "to consider the propriety of building a Court House."

On March 21, 1877, this committee was authorized to prepare plans and specifications and contract for the construction of a "Brick Court House for Liberty County." In May, the firm of Thomas & Werney, Contractors, filed their Bond and commenced the construction of Liberty County's fifth Courthouse, the second one to be constructed of brick. This

building deteriorated very rapidly as major repairs were needed within five years after this courthouse had been constructed.

By 1895, it was decided that a new courthouse should be constructed. The existing courthouse, less than 20 years old, was condemned and ordered removed from the square. The county records were placed in the custody of the Sheriff and the county offices were moved to the County Jail Building, to the extent that space was available there. A shed located in the northeast corner of the Court House Square was designated as the "Court House" for the purpose of holding District Court and for other official business. On September 25, 1895, the Masons of the Liberty Lodge laid the cornerstone for Liberty County's sixth Courthouse which was completed and accepted from the contractors on March 4, 1896. It was of pressed brick construction and three stories in height, and was erected at a cost of approximately \$40,000.

This courthouse was fondly remembered by some of the older citizens of



### "THE ROOF"

One of the more unusual structures ever erected along U.S. Highway 90 was "The Roof," a popular drive-in located just east of Liberty. The business opened its doors on Saturday, March 12, 1955. Owners Jimmy and Mary Jane (Ford) Comstock offered a menu that included "Roof Burgers," foot-long hot dogs, "real Mexican tacos," and Dairy Frost Frozen Custard. Anyone who ordered a "Roof Burger" that first Saturday automatically earned themselves a free Coca Cola or root beer.

Jimmy Comstock, a former football standout for the Hull-Daisetta Bobcats, designed and built the structure himself. Although the 1140 square foot "roof" appeared to be sitting on a 36-foot wide concrete slab, there was actually a one-foot wall that separated roof from cement. Vast expanses of glass allowed customers to watch food and drink preparation.

this building was an observation tower which provided an excellent view of the surrounding area. It was a popular pastime to climb up into this tower where some excellent early-day photographs were taken from this vantage point by amateur photographers. This tower was topped by a

the Commissioners and by the Grand Jury of Liberty County, it was determined that the old red brick courthouse was no longer adequate for the needs of Liberty County and did not provide sufficient protection for the records of the county. The commissioners therefore ordered that plans and specifications be prepared for a new courthouse and by November 10, 1930, they had entered into a contract.

Liberty County's seventh Courthouse was constructed of Texas Cordova Cream Limestone, featuring Spanish masonic tile floors, steam heating and refrigerated water fountains, at a cost of \$210,000 and it was completed and ready for occupancy by October of 1931. While this structure was being erected, the county offices were located primarily in the County Jail Building in the Masonic Building. The old wood-frame Methodist Church building built in 1904 was moved to the rear of the church property in the 1900 block of Cos Avenue and had been recently vacated for a new church structure completed in January 1931. This building was leased by the county and utilized as a court room for the first ten months of 1931.

In 1957, the courthouse was renovated and an annex constructed on the west side to house the offices of the County Tax Collector and County Auditor with additional offices on the second floor. The cost of these improvements was approximately \$500,000.

In 1995 the exterior of this limestone courthouse

was cleaned and weather-proofed and all metal window framework was cleaned and repainted in its original color of black. This reconditioning has greatly improved the appearance of this courthouse for which the cornerstone had been

laid 65 years earlier, it being the seventh courthouse to serve Liberty County on this site since the county was created in 1836. It has retained the distinction of having the largest district courtroom in the entire state since 1931.

## Liberty County's seventh Courthouse was ... completed and ready for occupancy by October of 1931.

Liberty as a popular gathering place. A water cistern, located in the center of the building on the ground floor, collected and stored the rain water which fell on the courthouse roof. Access to this cistern was available to everyone through an entrance and hallway on each side of this building. The East and West entrances were accentuated by two story arches. Under these arches, on the second floor, were balconies opening out from the large courtroom which dominated this floor. Rising from the center of

cupola upon which a statue, referred to as the "Goddess of Liberty," was erected.

Other features of the Courthouse Square included hitching racks and concrete watering troughs located just outside the iron picket fence which completely enclosed the courthouse yard. Revolving wrought iron gates permitted ingress and egress to the courthouse yard from each of the four sides of the square. The spacious yard and the area on each side of this block were utilized as the Liberty County "Fair Grounds" from 1909 until 1922, at which time the Fair was moved to the new Pavilion on the City Park Square.

In mid-1927, the question of the necessity of constructing a new courthouse or of making substantial repairs to the old courthouse came before the Commissioners Court. After an inspection of the building by



From Illustrated Press of Liberty County, Thursday, December 21, 1965 –

Ray Johnson suffers considerable invasion of privacy as his photographer dad, W.R. Johnson, catches him taking a dip in his outdoor swimming pool.



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